

CHAPTER XII

REGULATION OF PUBLIC LIFE

POLITICAL INSTITUTIONS

642 LIKE most other aspects of their culture, the political organization
177 of the Hottentots in recent times shows to a considerable extent the
signs of Dutch influence. For information as to their original form
of government we must therefore refer mainly to the accounts of
the earlier writers. Here, again, our principal authority is Kolb,
who describes the political institutions of the Cape Hottentots more
fully and explicitly than does any other observer.

643 He states¹ that at the head of every tribe there was a chief, *Amupai*
or *Akappa*, whose office was hereditary in the male line. The normal

644 heir to the chieftainship was the eldest son of the ruling chief. Failing

622 a son, the office passed to the nearest male relative, such as a brother
or a brother's son, but never to a daughter. The new chief at his
accession had to pledge himself before an assembly of the "captains"
of the tribe to preserve all the old laws and traditions of the people,
and not to interfere with any established rights and prerogatives.

[5N] He had also to slaughter a couple of sheep or an ox as a feast for the
"captains". Only these men and himself ate of the meat, while the
broth was given to their wives. On the following day or on some
suitable occasion a similar feast was provided by his wife for the
wives of the captains. This time the meat was eaten by the women,
and the broth given to their husbands. There is no other record of
any installation ceremony connected with the chieftainship, so that
the accuracy of Kolb's statements in this respect cannot be vouched for.

643 The functions of the chief were apparently purely political. He
644 led the army in war, he conducted the negotiations of peace, and he
622 presided over the tribal council. The latter was the real governing
645 body of the tribe. It consisted of the "captains" or headmen of
all the different local groups constituting the tribe, and was summoned
by the chief to his residence whenever any matter of public importance
arose. It dealt with all such questions as peace and war, disputes

¹ *Reise zum Vordrings der Gauen Nafburg*, 42-4; cf. Frisch, *Eingeborenen Süd-Afrika's*,
322-3.

(43) revenue. It appears, however, from the report of an expedition made
 (55) to the Inqua in 1689 under the leadership of Ensign Schrijver, that
 [22] in this tribe at least there was a regulation that anyone killing game
 in the chase might not eat of it until he had made a present to the chief.
 In ignorance of this custom one of Schrijver's party shot a bird and
 cooked it, whereupon the chief expressed displeasure and refused
 to carry on any more farther with the Dutch travellers. As soon
 as Schrijver was made aware of the circumstance and of the tribe
 usage, he sent the chief a present of beads, which was received as am-
 ationment for the mistake.¹ There is no other record of any similar
 prerogative of the chief's, so that one cannot say whether the usage
 just described existed in the other Cape Hottentot tribes as well.
 Kolb, as we have noted, says that no tribute at all was paid to the chief
 he lived, like any ordinary tribesman, upon the milk of his cattle
 and there is nothing to indicate that he was necessarily more wealthy
 than anybody else. He might be accorded a good deal of respect
 but there is no mention of any special etiquette or ceremonial observance
 towards him.

- (42) Kolb's description, inadequate though it is from many points of
 view, shows clearly that among the Cape Hottentots the local groups
 (48) were to a large extent autonomous, although the important affairs of
 (49) the tribe as a whole were regulated by their headmen in council.
 (42) Some light is thrown upon this by Mrs. Hoernlé's analysis of the
 social organization of the Naman. It will be remembered from this
 that every Hottentot tribe as a rule was scattered over the country
 in smaller groups, each group consisting of a clan or of some part
 of a clan. The chief of the tribe was the head of the senior clan, and
 if a man of fine character could command a good deal of respect
 but the heads of the other clans acted as his council, and he could
 not do much without their co-operation. The bonds holding together
 the clans to form a tribe were never very strong, and often enough
 a powerful clan would assert its independence of the others, and in
 time become recognized as a separate tribe, with its own headman
 as chief. In all probability the "captains" referred to by Kolb were
 such headmen of clans of the tribe, and, as we shall see later, in actual
 fact the different local divisions of the Cape Hottentot tribes were
 only loosely connected together, and would often act independently
 of one another, at times even against one another. The Dutch
 practice of treating these headmen or "captains" as more or less

¹ Quoted in Gollie-Mohlberg, *Reise in die Kaap*, II, 111.

Cape. Hottentots

POLITICAL INSTITUTIONS

331

anonymous petty rulers naturally tended to accentuate the feeling of independence. At the same time it also gave the "captain" a more prominent position as an individual than he really seems to have occupied in the original conditions of native life.

As Kolb's description also brings out, the whole conduct of public affairs was the concern of the adult men generally, and, as appears from the descriptions of other writers, of the older men in particular. The chief, by virtue of his hereditary status, was the recognized head of the community, but his authority was circumscribed and precarious, and he could not act without consulting his council. It seems indeed, that in most cases he must be looked upon as the political representative rather than as the actual ruler of the tribe. There is nothing in the literature to indicate that he had any other special functions. Neither Kolb nor any other writer records any important religious or magical ceremonies which the chief had to perform on behalf of the tribe, any definite prohibitions or obligations regulating the relations between him and his subjects, or any ritual performances or taboos to which he was specially subjected. The sacred character often associated with the chieftainship in primitive society does not appear to have existed among the Hottentots.

The political organization of the Naman was in all probability originally the same as that of their southern relatives. But by the beginning of the nineteenth century, from which time onwards most of the relevant literature dates, the old form of government among the Orlams was being slowly altered into a crude modification of the system developed by the Dutch at the Cape. The influence of these incoming groups, and to some extent also of the missionaries, gradually affected the form of political institutions in the other Nama tribes as well. The system of tribal control found among them within recent years, although based upon the old native system, can therefore by no means be regarded as representing that system in its original form. It is nevertheless of considerable interest as illustrating the grafting of European elements upon Hottentot organization, and since it is in any case an integral part of the tribal life it cannot be ignored. The information bearing upon it is also more detailed and accurate than that relating to the Cape Hottentots, which it serves to supplement in several respects.¹

¹ The principal sources are: Schöten, *Deutsch-Südwest-Afrika*, 100-31; von François, *Nama und Damara*, 108-22; Kolb, "Die Rasse der Hottentotten," 377-91; *Report on the Nations of S.W.A.*, 72-4, 76 and *passim*; cf. also Tiedt, *Great Namaaland*, 33-41; Opp, *Anglo-Nama*, 241; Wessels, "Die Klam-Rhoen," 322-41; Schöten, *Namaland and Kolonial*, 3251; Volke, "The Nama," 140.

POLITICAL INSTITUTIONS

331

has to be a Chief even before you are born."¹ The implication, in Hahn's statement, that the chief has the special economic function of providing for his poorer subjects, is not borne out by any other writer, apart from Shaw's remark about the milk, but it is a point that does not appear to have been specially investigated.

As will have been noticed, the oldest feature in the old political system of the Hottentots has been preserved in the modified system evolved by the Nama under European influence, viz. the fact that the conduct of public affairs, including the administration of justice, lay in the hands of the older men generally and that the chief had no distinctive authority. The principal modifications are the substitution of a limited elected council for the informal council of clan head-men, and the appointment of various public officials with special functions corresponding to their Dutch titles. This differentiation in governmental functions does not appear to have existed at all in purely native conditions.

It must also be mentioned that to some of the Orlam chiefs, whose military prowess had made them feared and respected throughout the country, the temptation to become autocrats was very strong, and few could resist it. They generally contrived, therefore, either to act quite independently of the council, which they treated as a mere advisory body, or, as in the case of Hendrik Witbooi, chief of the /Hobosmen, they dispensed altogether with elections and nominated their own councils and officials, thus ensuring that their own trusty friends and supporters were placed in power. Hendrik Witbooi was a warrior chief of outstanding ability and enterprise, to whom democratic government was very irksome and distasteful. At the height of his power he styled himself the "Lord of the Water and the Head Chief of Great Namaqualand"; letters addressed to him as the "King of Great Namaqualand" received immediate and gracious attention; and to his death he was a firm believer in the "divine right of kings", claiming that he owed responsibility to no one except "God the Father in Heaven".²

The following "Proclamation", published by him in the early days of 1891, is of some interest, because it gives an idea of the system of government existing among all the Nama tribes at the time of the German annexation of South-West Africa. The only difference

¹ Report on the Nations of S.W.A., 75, 81.

² Some illuminating examples of his correspondence are published by van Fraunce, op. cit. vol. iv, 227-30; Report on the Nations of S.W.A., 83, 249, 261; Koeb, "The Diary of Hendrik Witbooi," 37-41, passim.

843 they frequently massage her. During the last months before the birth the young woman generally goes back to her mother. The older relatives of the mother function as midwives and are by no means inefficient. By rising too soon, however, 844 the mother unfortunately exposes herself to danger and disease among women are consequently not unusual. The christening line is the hands of the father. In olden days 851 every child received a Nama name reminiscent of the circumstances just antecedent or subsequent to the birth, but the 849 Christian Nama have given up this custom, and Biblical and European names are very general lately. The midwife who 842 assists at the birth often gets a present which consists of two goats when a boy is born; when a girl is born, this is reduced by half.

857 5. It is held that the adolescent girl will very soon be a
871 help to her mother, and boys have to look after the herds from their very early youth. In this matter the school has to fight many a fight with the parents, who do not realize that, in order to make progress, the child has to attend classes regularly. The mother always regards it as more proper to employ the girl at home, and when a goat is lost, it is much more important to send the boy into the pastures to look for it than that he should attend school. But a change has taken place in this respect and the Nama now learn to understand that a regular attendance at class will be of importance to the child in later years.

841 6. When at the age of 12-14 years the first menstruation sets in with adolescent girls, the whole family celebrates the occasion. In a corner of the hut which is separated from the rest of the room by means of a curtain, the girl is isolated and adorned with all sorts of ornaments by the feminine members of the family. A festival day is appointed, and in families where old customs are still adhered to the girl is given fresh cow-milk to drink. The milk must come from a cow that has its first calf. If this cow does not die during the days of the menstruation or if she does not get ill, the girl is harmless. But if the cow should die it is proof that 784 this girl possesses special powers, and she dare not drink milk from the herd again during the days of menstruation lest she imperil the herd.

784 Her menstrual blood is looked upon as effective poison which, when dry, they rub from the clothes and mix with 754 hated people's food in order to kill them. The blood of the 757 harmless girl on the other hand is used as medicine for sexual diseases amongst men.

593 7. The brothers and sisters call one another by their names.
576 The parents are also accustomed to calling their children by their names unless they prefer to call the little sucklings "Little Father" or "Little Mother." But children are not allowed to call their parents or their parents' elderly relatives

538 monium enthusiast, however, did not care for that and
517 mused playing up to midnight. When this was prohibited
as against the rules of the house, he answered that he did not
know that they were not allowed to study after nine o'clock.
One night after that he was found at the harmonium at two
o'clock in the morning and excused himself by saying that
the rules of the house, which he was willing to abide by, did
not stipulate at what time of the morning a pupil could begin
to study! In four months' time he had made so much pro-
gress in playing the harmonium that he accompanied the
hymns in the community services.

532 8. Many of the young people also show aptitude in the art
517 of painting. A grandson of the notorious Hendrik Withomi
painted two ostriches with such a typically African back-
ground in coloured chalk on the board for his final examination
after three years' preparation for the profession of teacher.
that even the Government Inspector was amazed. Thus, the
results of the mental development of the Nama, clearly per-
ceptible to-day, show that the trouble and pains bestowed on
them bear fruit; and nothing is more erroneous than to
imagine the Hottentots are mentally one of the most primitive
races. In the political economy of South-West Africa their
weakly physique will play a very small part however; but for
work which does not exact much bodily strength but requires
intelligence the Nama will in the future be preferred to other
natives.

IX. USAGE AND LAWS.

• 642 The Chief with councillors and magistrate is the represen-
643 tative of the law. The last named is his right hand in all
645 public and legal matters. Under normal circumstances the
son inherits the chieftainship from his father. In times of
peace the powers of the Chief are very limited. Without
having consulted a mass meeting and without the decision of
the councillors the instructions of a chief are of very little
consequence. The form of government of a chieftainship is
altogether democratic. Within this democratic frame, how-
ever, the Chief rules like a patriarch. This state of affairs is
radically changed during war. If a war breaks out the Chief
becomes dictator.

645 The councillors are elected at a mass meeting, and at the
643 same time function as judges. Decisions by them are re-
garded as laws by the tribe and their sentences, passed under
the presidency of the eldest among them, are executed. There
is no appeal to a higher court. Only in cases where there is
no consensus of opinion among the judges with regard to the
[643] passing of a sentence is the matter referred to the Chief whose
casting vote then settles the question finally.

[641] 2. As the Nama possess a very fine sense of justice and
642 injustice, legal disputes are not at all uncommon. But since